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C.I.A., Evaluating Soviet Threat, Often Is Not So Grim as Pentagon

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WASHINGTON, July 15 — When Representative John Edward Porter was contesting the Pentagon's case for developing new chemical weapons last year, he adopted an unusual tactic.

He turned to the Central Intelligence Agency.

Mr. Porter, an Illinois Republican, arranged a closed briefing for the House Appropriations Committee at which the C.I.A. delivered an evaluation of the Soviet chemical warfare threat. The analysis was less ominous than that of the Pentagon, as the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. John A. Wickham Jr., has acknowledged in Congressional testimony. The C.I.A. view, General Wickham said, is that "there is less intention to use chemical weapons and, therefore, probably less of a threat."

Independent Role Continues

The C.I.A. still views Soviet military capabilities as a threat. But on a number of major issues, the C.I.A. has presented a less grim picture of Soviet military programs than that offered by the Pentagon under Caspar W. Weinberger and by other senior Administration officials.

To many Administration officials and members of Congress, this suggests that the agency, under William J. Casey, has generally maintained its tradition of independence and objectivity on Soviet military issues even as the Reagan Administration has taken policy in a more conservative direction.

This independence, they say, stems in part from the fact that the C.I.A. provides intelligence to a variety of Government agencies and increasingly to Congress and thus is less vulnerable to bureaucratic pressures than it would be if it reported to only one agency.

The C.I.A. analyses also suggest to some members of Congress that some Administration officials have exaggerated Soviet military capabilities in order to win support for the Pentagon's spending requests.

"I think that the C.I.A. has probably driven Secretary Weinberger and some in the Department of Defense up the wall by reporting accurately on Soviet threats and not just saying what everybody wants for a budget hearing," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Pentagon officials say, however, that military intelligence officials generally err on the side of caution in projecting Soviet capabilities so that the American military will not be caught short in a conflict.

The C.I.A. has challenged a number of important Pentagon assertions and has issued findings that undermine arguments made by White House and other Administration officials:

¶It has disputed Pentagon assertions that the Soviet SS-19 missile has the accuracy to be an effective first-strike weapon.

¶It has concluded that the United States previously exaggerated the yield of the Soviet underground tests of nuclear weapons and has adopted a new method for estimating the tests' explosive power, which has the effect of lowering United States estimates. This has raised questions about White House allegations that the Soviet Union has violated the 1974 Threshold Test Ban Treaty.

¶It has provided a more cautious reading than that of some Administration officials of the pace of Soviet research on antimissile systems. It has also raised questions about the military usefulness of a new Soviet radar facilty that is under construction in central Siberia, which the Administration has repeatedly suggested may be part of a future Soviet antimissile network.

¶It has contradicted some Administration statements that the Soviet Union could not significantly expand its forces if the limits in the second strategic arms treaty are dropped.

¶It has disputed Pentagon estimates of Soviet military spending and has concluded that Soviet spending on new weapons has been flat for years.

The agency's assessments on these and other issues have clearly become a source of consternation for hard-line conservatives on Capitol Hill.

Senator Jesse Helms, for example, sent Mr. Casey a letter last fall that castigated the agency for "the long-standing habit of the C.I.A. of underestimating Soviet intentions and military capabilities." Senator Helms suggested that the C.I.A.'s estimates be revised to present a more threatening view of Soviet military programs.

It is not possible to assess independently the validity of some of the C.I.A.'s findings. But some of the agency's conclusions, such as the one on the yield of Soviet tests, are supported by studies by experts outside the Government.

C.I.A. Has Some Shelter From Political Pressures

The C.I.A. is generally regarded as less subject to institutional pressures than other Government intelligence agencies. Unlike the Defense Intelligence Agency, which produces intelligence reports solely for the Pentagon, the C.I.A. serves a number of Government agencies and, increasingly, Congress.

As a result, officials say the C.I.A. does not have to worry that the agency receiving an intelligence estimate has a stake in how the estimate comes out.

But the C.I.A. has not been immune from some political pressures. In the mid-1970's, some conservatives assailed the agency for understating the Soviet threat. A panel of hard-line former officials and experts, called "Team B," was established by the White House to critique the agency's performance.

After Ronald Reagan was elected President, conservatives continued their effort to influence the agency and make it a special target for "re-education," as one conservative put it at the time.

These initial efforts by conservatives and the appointment of Mr. Casey as Director of Central Intelligence led to worries on the part of some members of Congress, including some members of the intelligence committees, that the C.I.A. might alter its analyses to reflect the policies of the new Administration.

By all accounts, Mr. Casey has held to his conservative views on matters of policy. In private White House meetings, he has sided with Defense Secretary Weinberger and other critics of the second strategic arms treaty in urging President Reagan to repudiate the treaty, officials report. And Mr. Casey has played up the Soviet threat in his speeches and has sometimes described Soviet military programs in terms that are starker than his agency's own analyses.

But while Mr. Casey has shown an interest in improving the quality of his agency's analyses, there is no evidence that he has sought, for political reasons, to influence the substance of intelligence reports on the Soviet Union or East-West relations.

Officials say he appears to have left considerable latitude to his professional or career deputies, such as Robert M. Gates, an expert on the Soviet arms control who was deputy director of the C.I.A. for intelligence and who now is the agency's No. 2 official.

"I am generally satisfied with the quality of the information we receive," said Senator William S. Cohen, Republican of Maine, a member of the Intelligence Committee and the Armed Services Committee. "I do not think that it is biased or ideologically slanted."

"Whether Casey is delegating authority to Gates or whether Gates is taking the ball and running with it, the reports are pretty high grade," said Mr. Cohen.

"We get good stuff," said Senator Dave Durenberger, the Minnesota Republican who heads the Senate Intelligence Committee, referring to agency reports on Soviet military developments and strategic issues. "I believe that Bill Casey knew that he had a real good President but one that was an inexperienced international politician. This President is only served by hard fact."

Another sign of independence is that analysts who are ideologically diverse have been appointed to important positions under Mr. Casey, said Stephen M. Meyer, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who specializes in Soviet military matters and serves as a consultant to the agency.

Some experts, such as Mr. Durenberger, drew a distinction between C.I.A. analyses on Soviet military development, which they deem to be objective, and the agency's reports on Central America.

"In terms of Central America, we sometimes get something that looks like an analyst's product that really ain't, like reports that the contras will be able to win under certain circumstances," said Mr. Durenberger. "Some of that stuff is cooked."

But other members of Congress, such as Mr. Leahy, said that even in this area, the C.I.A. had been objective.

Asked about C.I.A. findings on Soviet military issues, a senior intelligence official said the agency had prepared threatening analyses that have not become publicly known.

"This matter of differences between policy and intelligence assessments, including on strategic and arms control issues, is vastly exaggerated," the senior official said. "The overwhelming number of policy decisions are based on, or consistent with, the intelligence policy-makers receive."

But some experts say agency officials do not want their independence to be highlighted because they fear it will make them more vulnerable to conservative pressure. "They want to be perceived as being on the right so that they will be left alone," said Mr. Meyer.

Robert B. Sims, chief Pentagon spokesman, said, "We know that intelligence analysts do differ and it is worthwhile to have different analyses, but on the basic issues, we believe there is considerable agreement." Mr. Sims noted, for example, that both the C.I.A. and the Defense Intelligence Agency agreed that the Soviet Union was producing a "staggering" amount of weapons.

Differing Assessments About Soviet Missiles

The C.I.A. has prepared a number of important assessments in the area of Soviet strategic forces that run counter to assertions by the Reagan Administration and the White House.

One critical judgment has do with the SS-19 missile. In the late 1970's, intelligence officials expressed concern that the accuracy of Soviet missiles, particularly the SS-18 and the SS-19, was improving more quickly than expected.

This concern had important political significance and figured in the heated debate in the late 1970's and in the 1980 Presidential campaign. In that campaign Mr. Reagan said the Carter Administration had allowed the opening of the "window of vulnerability," the notion that American missiles were becoming vulnerable to Soviet attack.

But last year, a C.I.A. analysis circulating through the Government said the the SS-19 missile was less accurate than previously supposed. Based on the new estimates, the missile should no longer be considered an effective first-strike weapon, according to government experts. Senior Pentagon officials continue to disagree with this C.I.A. view.

Both the Pentagon and the C.I.A. agree that the Soviet Union's 308 SS-18 missiles still give the Soviet Union a substantial capability to attack United States missile silos.

In another important development, the C.I.A. revised its methodology for estimating the yield of Soviet underground nuclear tests based on seismic monitoring, an action that has undercut the Administration's charge of Soviet arms control violations.

The old methodology had led the Administration to conclude that the Soviet Union has probably violated the limits of the unratified threshold test ban treaty. But questions had been raised by experts on seismology as to whether that methodology took sufficient account of geological differences in the United States and the Soviet Union.

While panels of nongovernmental experts commissioned by the Air Force and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency had suggested that the procedures be changed, Richard N. Perle, Assistant Defense Secretary, opposed the move, arguing that seismic readings are not a sound basis for evaluating Soviet testing.

Despite these objections, the C.I.A. adopted the new procedures in January. This move has the general effect of lowering Government estimates of the yield of Soviet underground tests by about 20 percent.

Under the new estimating procedures, some Soviet tests still appear to be over the limit, but seismologists generally believe that the results are within the realm of uncertainty.

Radar Facility in Siberia Is Focus of One Debate

C.I.A. analyses have also raised questions about Administration assertions on Soviet research and development of antimissile technologies.

Administration officials have suggested that a large phased-array radar that is under construction at Abalakova in central Siberia may be part of a future nationwide missile defense of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the suggestion that the Soviet Union may be moving to deploy a defensive system has become one of the principal Pentagon arguments in behalf of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

But C.I.A. analysts have provided a more cautious reading of the purpose and capabilities of the Abalakova radar, an interpretation that Mr. Leahy said reflected one of the "biggest differences" between Pentagon and C.I.A. officials.

While not excluding the possibility that the radar could be intended as an element of an antimissile system, the C.I.A. has raised questions in a carefully worded statement about whether the facility would be effective in that role. It is the only Government agency publicly to do so.

The C.I.A., for example, has noted that the facility would be very vulnerable to American attack. In written response to questions from Senator William Proxmire, Mr. Gates, the agency's No. 2 official, said, "Because such radars are fixed and they are key nodes for an A.B.M. systems's capability, there will always be an issue of whether an A.B.M. system is worth having, which depends to a great extent on a few potentially quite vulner-

This view was in line with a classified 1984 assessment entitled "Implications of a New Soviet Phased Array Radar," which Administration officials have said was drafted by C.I.A. officials with input from other parts of the intelligence community.

In another case, the C.I.A. has disputed Energy Department assessments about the pace of the Soviet program to develop antimissile systems powered by nuclear explosions.

Last year Secretary of Energy John S. Herrington, whose department is sponsoring American research on nuclear antimissile systems, said the Soviet Union was "substantially ahead" in this area. Mr. Herrington said the Soviet Union might be able to deploy an X-ray laser, which is powered by a nuclear explosion, "with no additional testing."

But the C.I.A., in a letter to Representative Edward J. Markey, said, "The C.I.A. does not believe that the Soviet Union can deploy nuclear-driven directed-energy weapons without conducting additional explosive tests."

The C.I.A. has also generally said it will take the Soviet Union longer to develop laser and particle-beam antimissile and anti-satellite weapons than has been forecast in Soviet Military Power, an annual publication of the Pentagon that primarily reflects the view of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Recently, however, the publication has tended to take a more cautious view that more closely resembles C.I.A. assessments.

Sometimes, It Is C.I.A. Painting Grim Picture

Still, it is clear that the C.I.A. does not always view Soviet systems as less threatening than other agencies do. And officials said there also were cases in which Pentagon intelligence officials had lowered their estimates of the capabilities of Soviet weapons, bringing them more in line with C.I.A. assessments.

Officials report that Lawrence K. Gershwin, the national intelligence officer for strategic programs at the C.I.A., gives greater credence than do Defense Intelligence Agency officials to the possibility that Soviet SS-18 missiles may be deployed with more than 10 warheads.

The C.I.A. view, reflected in the National Intelligence Estimate, a high-level Government intelligence analysis provided to the President, is that the missile may have up to 14 warheads, while the Defense Intelligence Agency view is that the missile probably has 10 warheads. The missile has never been tested with more than 10 warheads.

On the second point, the Defense Intelligence Agency last year lowered its estimate of the range of the Soviet Backfire bomber and brought it within the scope of previous C.I.A. estimates. In the view of some Administration officials, the move undercut the Administration assertion that the bomber should be treated as a weapon with intercontinental capability in Geneva arms talks.

But while acknowledging these cases, officials also point to arms control, East-West policy issues and military spending as areas in which the C.I.A. has departed from some Administration assertions.

Strategic Arms Treaty An Object of Contention

C.I.A. analyses, for example, differ with some of the arguments used by the Administration to support its decision to repudiate the second strategic arms treaty of 1979.

Administration critics of the treaty have argued that the unratified treaty had no restraining effect on Soviet military programs and that dropping it would not make much difference.

But C.I.A. officials have publicly suggested otherwise. In 1982 Congressional testimony, Mr. Gates said the strategic arms treaties might have had a restraining effect on Soviet military spending. The "decisions to comply with SALT I and the unratified SALT II treaty also may have slowed the pace of procurement in certain areas," he said.

The C.I.A. has also noted that abandoning the treaty limits would allow a further expansion of the Soviet force with little additional effort by Moscow.

According to the agency analyses, the Soviet Union could build up its force from about 9,000 warheads to about 16,000 if treaty limits are maintained until the mid-1990's. But if the treaty limits are abandoned, the Soviet Union could expand its arsenal of missile warheads to 21,000 by stepping up its strategic program, though the C.I.A. has said that even this would not involve a "maximum effort."

In another difference, C.I.A. analysts have also questioned in internal deliberations some of the Administration's arguments for its proposed ban on Soviet long-range mobile missiles in a new arms treaty, officials report.

The Reagan Administration, in a policy switch last November, proposed a ban on long-range mobile missiles, where the Soviet have a lead, and justified the ban on the ground that limits on mobile missiles cannot be verified.

But one Administration official said, "the C.I.A. does not want to be associated with the mobile ban," adding, "it does not think that verification problems are all that different" from intermediate-range forces, where the United States has proposed verification measures for Soviet mobile missiles.

On general East-West issues, the C.I.A. prepared analyses early in the Reagan Administration that did not support the Administration's assertions that Western allies could be induced to support the United States effort to block construction of a pipeline to transport Siberian natural gas to Western Europe and that such an effort could be successful. The analyses upset some National Security Council staff members who wanted to mount an effort to block the pipeline.

Disagreements Continue On Soviet Arms Budget

A further area where there has been open disagreement between the C.I.A. and the Pentagon is the level of Soviet military spending.

The C.I.A. says that Soviet spending from 1974 to 1982 has increased at a rate of about 2 percent a year, once the effects of inflation are discounted. The C.I.A. analyses have also concluded that Soviet spending on new weapons has been essentially flat from 1974 to 1982. This represents a change from the mid-1960's through the early 1970's when Soviet military spending was growing at a more rapid rate.

The Defense Intelligence Agency has now come around to the C.I.A. view about past spending trends, but the two agencies continue to differ over the current rate of Soviet spending, with the Defense Intelligence Agency seeing a somewhat higher level.

The significance of the C.I.A. assessment is that it indicates that Soviet military planning operates somewhat independently of the swings in military spending in the United States and suggests that the Soviet military industry suffers from industrial bottlenecks.

This analysis runs counter to initial Administration assertions that the Soviet Union is engaged in a continued escalation of the arms race.

The estimates also "weaken the view that the Soviet Union is a dual economy composed of an inefficient, relatively backward civilian industry and a modern defense industry," wrote Richard F. Kaufman, the assistant director of the Joint Economic Committee, which holds annual hearings on the issue of Soviet military spending.

"Casey sometimes shoots from the hip," Mr. Kaufman said. "But he has not tried to impose his views on the institution when it comes to the analytical side. The analysts on Soviet and East European developments are objective. They deserve a lot of credit."

Associated Press

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The New York Times

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"We get good stuff," said Senator Dave Durenberger, Intelligence Committee chairman, discussing C.I.A. analyses.

Senator Jesse Helms criticized agency's "underestimating Soviet intentions and military capabilities."

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